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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000257

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SUBJECT: COMOROS QUIET BUT TENSE AS IT PONDERES NEXT STEPS

REF: A) ANTANANARIVO 250 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Following the swearing in of the Interim President of Anjouan (reftel), African Union (AU) and Union Army troops remain on alert against potential violence on the island of Anjouan. The mood in the Comoros is quiet but tense as people await France's decision regarding the legal treatment of deposed Anjouan leader Mohamed Bacar. Meanwhile, the Comoran Minister of Defense and the international community met to discuss "next steps," including the timing and composition of island presidential elections on Anjouan and inter-Comoran talks to resolve federalism issues. END SUMMARY.

THE COMOROS QUIET BUT TENSE  
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¶2. (SBU) The mood in the Comoros is quiet but tense as Comorans await France's decision regarding the legal treatment of Colonel Mohamed Bacar, currently under protective custody in Reunion. An official in the President's office told Post, "If France really wants justice to be done then neither the death penalty nor the extradition treaty should be the issue." They explained that only three individuals have faced the death penalty since Comoros' independence. Further, French "mercenaries" caught attempting a coup in Moheli several years ago were extradited to France upon France's request despite the absence of an official extradition treaty. Union President Ahmed Abdallah Sambi has publicly said the Government would accept if Bacar and his cronies were handed over to an international court, such as Arusha or The Hague, for judgment. Discussions between France and the Union Government are ongoing.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY PONDERES NEXT STEPS  
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¶3. (SBU) Meanwhile, in a charged four-hour meeting April 1, the Union Government (represented by Minister of Defense Mohamed Bacar Dossar) and the international community started to focus on "what comes next." The Union Government would like all rounds of elections on Anjouan completed before the end of May, because it hopes the International Monetary Fund will consider pardoning Comoros' debt at its meeting in June. Although the Government has made no definitive decision whether it will use the candidate list from Anjouan's botched June 2007 elections, or open it to newcomers, the Minister noted that some government officials are strongly in favor of sticking with the original lists in order to expedite the new elections -- a position applauded by French Ambassador Christian

Job. However, UN Representative Opia Kumah voiced the concern that "we may be making trouble for ourselves down the road" by not allowing enough time to revise electoral lists to include new voters and reopen candidate lists. In order to ensure elections are perceived as free, fair, and credible, he suggested a longer timeline (i.e. around June).

14. (SBU) Immediately after elections on Anjouan, the Union Government wishes to start an inter-Comoran dialogue between the legitimate representatives of each island, state institutions, and the National Assembly to address the legal discrepancies regarding the division of responsibilities and revenue between the Union and Island Governments. When asked, the Defense Minister said consulting civil society may be "useful," although he noted they are quite weak and passive in the Comoros. Dossar explained that changing the constitution is not the Government's end goal but amendments can be made via the legal steps stipulated within. However, he emphasized there are two items that are not up for debate: the autonomy of the islands and the rotating presidency among the islands. South Africa and France (via the International Organization of the Francophonie) offered to assist the Government in conducting these discussions, but the UN is not likely to be involved. (NOTE: The UN Representative privately told PolOff he fears if the "same cast of characters" -- the French and African Union -- steer the discussions, the Comoros will end up back where they started in 2001. END NOTE.) Public security on Anjouan was only discussed in the context of the upcoming island elections. France recommended the AU forces' mandate be extended throughout the electoral campaign period, while the AU Envoy encouraged South Africa, Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar to participate in the security and logistical run-up to the elections.

AU CRITICAL OF SOUTH AFRICA; FRANCE TAP DANCES  
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15. (SBU) AU Envoy Madeira and South African Ambassador Mabeta openly sparred during the meeting. Madeira said everything had gone according to plan and announced, "We succeeded in showing that we can undertake military action without dramatic catastrophe." Making a pointed dig at South Africa, Madeira said, "We were threatened by people who said we should try to resolve things peacefully. But those people advancing this argument did not understand that this country has been at war since its independence... It is legitimate to use violence to end violence, particularly when you have law and right on your side." Dripping with sarcasm, he thanked South Africa for its "constant" position of opposing military action: "When a country is constant, at least we know what one thinks." By contrast, the AU was warmly appreciative of U.S. support: "You may think the U.S. statement [issued March 28] was simple, but it was grand. When a big power speaks, people listen." He also credited the U.S. Charge's February 27 participation in the delegation that issued Bacar his last ultimatum with reinforcing the AU determination to move forward. Ambassador Mabeta was alone in maintaining that the military intervention against Anjouan had been a mistake.

16. (SBU) The French Ambassador gave a lengthy explanation to clarify the "suspicious" events, including the French helicopter crash on Anjouan March 23, feeding rumors of tacit French support for Bacar. Defense Minister Dossar listened silently while the international community, including Job himself, chuckled. Job formally requested the Union Government provide a detailed list of human rights violations committed by Bacar to assist the French agency dealing with his asylum request.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Very little has been decided about the logistics and composition of the upcoming elections on Anjouan, but the Union Government clearly wants to move as quickly as possible to put these issues behind it. The AU will organize a meeting of the Peace and Security Council on/around April 8 to discuss these issues. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT